

THE CONFERENCE

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What Is a Conference?

A conference is a group participation meeting in which a number of individuals examine a given subject or problem and express their opinions. Each participant in the conference is stimulated to share his knowledge and experience with others in the hope that a decision may be reached which represents the concerns, viewpoints and opinions of all in attendance.

The Conference is Distinguished From Other Meetings in That:

1. The group is relatively small (5-12).
2. The participants are selected to participate because of their knowledge and experience of the subject.
3. It's success is determined by the degree of participation of the conferees, and the extent to which their discussion resolves the question or problem.

The Conference Helps To:

1. Pool ideas, experience, knowledge and information
2. Analyze and solve problems cooperatively
3. Develops policies, rules, and procedures and reach an agreement on a plan of action.

Advantages of the Conference:

1. Plans and action are better accepted because the participants have a hand in their development on the basis of ideas and information which they thoroughly discussed.
2. Participants are able to interpret the plans of action in terms of their own experience, and visualize its practical application.
3. Because participants helped formulate the plan of action, they virtually have committed themselves to making it work, thus providing greater assurance of "follow through".

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Four Types of Conferences

The four types of conferences are: information sharing, developmental or instructional, attitude changing, and the problem-solving conference. All four types of conferences are used in management to assist the manager when a problem or a particular situation requires a number of different opinions. The conference most used in management is the problem-solving conference.

Type 1 - Information Sharing

Each person submits whatever helpful information or experience he may have that he feels ought to be shared with the group. A typical Monday morning management meeting is an information conference in which each individual tells what he did in the previous week or what the current problems are in his department. It is a meeting rather than a conference if no attempt is made to come to a group understanding or a group decision. If, on the other hand, there is discussion and some problem arises in which the leader desires to get the opinion and judgment of the group as a whole, the meeting moves into a conference procedure. When there is discussion of a particular topic in order to secure understanding (such as in a developmental conference) or to come to a decision on a policy or a standard procedure (such as would be typical of a problem-solving conference), the leader needs to make effective use of conference techniques.

Type 2 - Developmental or Instructional

This is a type of conference session called primarily to provide instruction and to develop understanding through discussion. Many conferences conducted by training departments are developmental or instructional in nature. In colleges where they make increasing use of this type, they often refer to it as a seminar.

In the developmental or instructional conferences, the leader is usually well informed on the topic or matter to be discussed. He knows the right answers, he knows what he wants the members to think and understand at the conclusion of the conference.

Instead of simply telling the group what he knows, or having them recite to him, he introduces factors new to them and leads the group members so they individually think through the topic and come to a fairly uniform understanding regarding it. He knows the problem and the answers to the problem even before the conference is held. But, he gets each member of the group to think through to his own understandings and conclusions by participation in an exchange of ideas. As a result, the members have thought through to the right conclusions and will thereafter accept and use them.

Type 3 - Attitude Chan

A conference to "air" attitudes, feelings or emotions may be called largely to let members "blow off steam," to get rid of complaints, come into with the other fellow's point of view or feelings about the It gives everyone a feeling of participation or "ownership" in going on. Such a conference forestalls trouble, friction, or on. It often rises to higher levels and builds morale, improv team spirit and cooperation. Usually no decisions are made by up but everyone goes away with better understandings and with better feelings toward each other. These are attitude-airing and, therefore attitude changing conferences. Very often a problem-solving conference (described below) needs to go through a preliminary period of attitude airing. After each member gets his feelings, inhibitions, or frustrations off his chest, the group settles down to face the real problem and to tackle it in the problem-solving part of the conference.

Type 4 - Problem-Solving

This type of conference is called primarily to think through a specific problem and to come to a definite decision, or at least to indicate the judgment of the group in regard to appropriate action. The decision may actually be made by the conference group if it is authorized to do so. If it does not have such authority the official decision may be made by the appropriate executive as a result of recommendations stemming from the conference.

The leader in a problem-solving conference need not know what the actual problem is. He simply states the purpose of the conference and gets a description of the facts in the situation which make it unsatisfactory. He then leads the conference to a clarification and definition of the actual problem or problems which are to be solved. The leader may not know the solutions to the problems, although he may have some tentative ones in mind. He leads the group in making suggestions of possible solutions and in the selection of the best solutions.

The problem-solving conference differs markedly from the developmental or instructional type. In the instruction type the leader does know the right answers and simply seeks to get understanding. In the problem-solving conference the leader may not know the problem or the solution, but gets the group members to create solutions which they define and accept as real.

Summary

The conference is a valuable tool when properly used by managers. It develops mutual understanding among participants, company loyalty by stimulating a feeling of "belonging," and greater enthusiasm in a project.